

Why Suffering?

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Why Suffering?

WHAT are we to do with the problem of sorrow and pain? How can the existence of these afflictions to the human spirit be reconciled with a belief that the universe, and all within it, is controlled by a benevolent God?

This problem, religious people dare not dodge. The thinkers in religion have not avoided it. On the contrary, there is probably no matter in all theology to which more earnest thought has been devoted through the ages, or about which so much has been said and written. Naturally so, since a religion means nothing that is of any particular importance unless by it men and women are enabled to face, with conviction and courage, the fundamental realities of their earthly life; and of these, sorrow is one of the chief. It is required of man that he should not dodge facts, even though they be most unpleasant and even alarming to contemplate.

Only if the Christian venture of faith has within it that which impels one to look squarely at the essential tragedy of human life, and to rise above that tragedy without a sense of defeat and futility, has it passed the acid test.

Sorrow and pain are fundamental facts of life, to be experienced by every human being. This is no less true now than it was in the days that are gone. Man has discovered many palliatives for pain, but no cure. He has been able to prolong life, but in the end he still must die; and it is entirely possible that with the lengthening of life has come increase of strain, of sorrow, of disappointment, to be borne. The total amount of sorrow which man must endure has at least not been lessened with the passing years, although its character has perhaps somewhat been changed.

The longer we live and the higher our development, the greater is our knowledge of pain. This seems to be in accordance with the biological law which states that the more complex the organism the more its sensitivity. Cabbages feel no pain. As far as we can observe, worms feel next to none of it, not even when we cut them

in two. The more complicated the animal, the more the anguish possible and necessary. In man, the highest organism yet created, agony is manifold. Physical pain tortures him more than it does any of the beasts; anxiety and the sense of sin and the sense of failure to achieve, all add their mental quota; finally, there are the deepest and most poignant of all sorrows, the tribulations of love—not merely the pains of passion, although even they are of a seriousness not to be minimized, but the haunting woe of loneliness, the disappointed reaching out of one's soul for a comradeship which one never adequately finds.

All of these things together form for man a complex of sorrow which must be faced as an inevitable part of life, and for which some explanation must be discovered. From time immemorial, man has been trying to arrive at what that explanation is.

The easiest solution is to ignore the problem and turn one's thought to other things. At least that is easy when one is young. The burden of the reality of life rarely comes to men and women until they have arrived at a considerable

maturity. Only those youths and maidens who are imaginative can see what is going to come to them later on. Blindness to the inevitability of sorrow is, of course, the chief weakness of youth, the explanation of its apparent superficiality, the secret of its false optimism, the source of its intolerance and cruelty, the reason it cannot be entrusted with control over the affairs of men. When we are young, despite the fact that we see other people in travail all about us, it seems to us absurd to think that we, too, shall be called upon to endure. Ahead of us, bathed in rosy colour, lie the hills and valleys of tomorrow. Only those who are peculiarly sensitive can in the earlier years appreciate what life is, and must be, for all human beings, including eventually themselves.

There is always among men and women a natural but fatal tendency to offer even into maturity the denial of pain, sometimes its vehement denial, as constituting an explanation. Pain, these people of arrested development insist, is an illusion of the human brain. Everything is good in this perfectly harmonious world. This smiling subterfuge has frequently present-

ed itself even in religion, sometimes taking upon itself even the sacred name of Jesus Christ. The reference is not merely to that curious Manichæan heresy known as Christian Science, the peak of the development of which happily now seems past. The reference is, rather, to something as much more common as it is more dangerous. How greatly Protestantism, and even to some extent Catholicism, has degenerated under the influence of a spurious optimism!

There is a sweetly hearty quality about many modern presentations of the Christian religion, that offends those who face reality. Many of them offer to us a faith and practice in which there is no crucifix. Perhaps there may be a gilded cross, from which the agony has been erased. Perhaps there is no cross at all, lest we be reminded of what once was there. There is too much of easy assumption that serenity and peace are to be attained by affirmation, rather than by fierce, heart-rending agony creatively endured. So much of this sentimental treacle has emanated from the Churches that many men and women who are realistically alert to life have left them to their pretty-pretty God

of make-believe, and gone their way in search of nobler things. The trouble with most which passes for “modernistic” Christianity is not that it is sinful or stupid, though often it is both, but rather that it is sentimental. It dodges pain.

There is a second solution of the problem of sorrow which at first glance seems more sane, but is, nevertheless, inadequate—the solution which says that sorrow is, but that God is not. How can there be evil in this world, and agony for men, if indeed there be a good God who presides over the universe? “There is,” the advocates of this second solution cry, “there is, there can be, no God.” This atheistic solution, we may think at first, does indeed suffice. It tells us that we are the helpless creatures of blind force. But in explaining evil in this way, we fail utterly to explain *good*. We are left with nothing for which to strive. We make life a mad nightmare. We make death better than living. The explanation is too easy. In destroying the problem, it destroys all human significance. Evil, sin, pain, woe—these are not all that there is to life. There are also courage, faith, hope, joy, love. Neither side of the picture may be neglect-

ed if we are to arrive at an adequate description.

A better, but still inadequate, explanation is based on the belief that justice is the central concept back of everything. In India, especially, this theory has been brought to high development, in the doctrine of KARMA. According to this way of looking at things, all suffering is punishment for sin and self-will. Man of course immediately objects to this. He says, "I have endured many, many things which I have not deserved." KARMA replies, "It may be that you have not merited them in this life; but in some previous existence which was yours, once on a time, you sinned, and it is for such wickedness that now you pay." Man objects again, "Behold, I see the unrighteous in great prosperity and happy all the day. Surely he escapes all payment for his wickedness." KARMA replies, "That may be so, as far as this present existence goes; but in incarnations yet to come, this evil man who now avoids all ill, will have to pay, here on this earth, the penalty. Sin and suffering are equal. The punishment fits the crime."

There are two things wrong with this solu-

tion. In the first place, there is absolutely no evidence that any man lives on this earth more than once. Secondly, and more important, if life does consist only of satisfying for one's sin by one's pain, if there is no creative purpose in life higher than a just restitution to stern destiny, then life is really a dead and futile thing; then we are no sharers in anything that grows and develops; then the best that we can do is to pay a debt; then the greatest man is he who does no wrong, rather than he who does good; then happy is the man who does nothing for fear that he may do evil; then the noblest achievement is to kill desire and to sit beside the Indian road in a perpetual inactivity. Such a world, a world built upon cold justice, is an intolerable world, meaningless, futile. It gets nowhere. The purpose of sorrow cannot be merely to pay for sin committed.

THE only other solution at which man has arrived is one which is *not so much rational as vital*—the solution of Jesus Christ: the knowledge that in Reality, in God Himself, is a great *creative agony* of willed compassion; the conviction that pain may be by any person, with

God's help, transmuted from a thing purposelessly endured to a thing creatively used; the realization that sorrow, if we understand and dedicate it, can release a vast dynamic which alone can build human values, build them not merely in the sufferer himself but in the whole world of humanity. Out of pain, comes power. It is the tool whereby mankind may be lifted from the level of the beasts to the level of the gods. Agony is not to be denied or merely to be endured; it is to be employed. To the extent that I meet, with aggressive personality, the complex of physical woe and mental strain and the burden of loneliness and the heartbreak of rejection, in the measure that I bear that which the sins and stupidities of all creation have engendered, and offer it to God as my bit for the woes of mankind, to that degree I am freed from personal inhibitions and can create—create strong men out of weaklings, brave women out of cowards, children who are worth while, friends who grow. In that creative transmutation of my sorrow, I shall find myself happy, freed from futility, a co-maker with God of that which was meant to be.

Fortunately for us, Jesus, who knew the limitations of mankind as well as its possible glories, has taught all this to us not merely by verbal explanation but, more effectively, by the great drama, the greatest of all dramas, wherein He Himself shares in that creative pain. Surely He, too, has borne our sorrows. He is acquainted with grief. He who is equal with God, yet makes Himself of no reputation and, in flesh like ours, endures all things, even to the death of the cross. “In Him God enters into the world’s agony and breaks its downward drag and transmutes it into victory.” He hangs, in this ageless drama, upon His cross, over against Jerusalem. There, in that city, all that is evil is rewarded with prosperity, while He who hangs outside, upon a silent tree, and is in all things good, is yet racked in rejection. This is life: in externalities, life as it is; in internal force, life as it may become.

From contact with Jesus crucified, there has come to Christians through the centuries, and still does come, not a logical explication of the problem of sorrow—that lies hidden deep in the mind of God, too deep for any man to go—but rather what does equally well suffice, an ability

bravely to use suffering. From every such facing of difficulty there has been released, and still is released, power—power which creates life, reveals life, completes life. All that we are which is above the level of the beasts, has come from such nobilities in them that have gone before us. It is nothing much to endure pain that is deserved. Almost anybody can do that. It is to endure pain, suffering wrongfully, which helps in the salvation of all that vast creation which, as says the Apostle, “groans and travails in agony together until now.”

The crucifix is the mirror of life, both as it is and as it may be. Small wonder that the crucifix remains the holiest symbol of the human race. Small wonder that the perpetual pleading of Calvary’s sacrifice, in the Sacrament of the Altar, is still the central act of human worship. Small wonder that in the Communion of the Body and Blood of the torn Christ is the sustaining power of human life.

Two further things need to be said, just here, about that sharing of ours in the agony of Calvary, by which alone its benefits may accrue to us or to others. There are many people who

admit all this of which we have been speaking, but who nevertheless fail, by two small and difficult steps, in making it their own. Two things must be done by us if Calvary is to be anything more than a pitiful pageant, if it is to become a source of personal vitality.

In the first place, we must fully face the fact of our own problems, pains, sorrows. That is what the Lord did. That is what Gethsemane means. We must look fearlessly at what is involved in our own living. To face it is not at all the same thing, be it noted, as brooding over it. There are few things more dangerous to sanity than a melancholic dwelling upon one's woes, even though our suffering be real and not imaginary. The first thing one knows, one is weaving a sad romance about one's self, in which one moves about the world, a tragic and self-pitied hero. That comes close to what is a perilous form of insanity. To face one's sufferings, pains, sorrows, means rather to get them out into the open and to evaluate them objectively. Sometimes the best way to do that is to talk them over privately with a clear-thinking person, not too close a friend, who can appraise the situation fairly

and help one to do the same one's self. What is needed is to look straight at the tragedy, whatever it may be, neither denying its existence nor minimizing its difficulty, and at the same time to see it in the perspective of a universe that on the whole is good, not evil. Such an adviser of those who are in trouble, a priest ought to be and usually is. Not all priests are helpful, to be sure, for there are some of them whose sympathetic tears flow much too easily. But normally an experienced priest is the best man to whom to go for the necessary assistance.

We must know those problems for what they are. This applies not merely to such comparatively easy things to bear as physical illness. It applies to deeper things as well. For instance, a woman came to a priest not long ago and said: "I married when I was eighteen. It was a ghastly mistake. Now that I am in my thirties I have for the first time come to love—but not my husband. What shall I do? Divorce is impossible, not only because I am a Christian but because my husband still loves me. I cannot face this thing. It is too much for anyone." She had to face it, in all its implications. To do so meant

for her a new Calvary; but as long as she dodged the issue, all that she had was pain, purposeless pain. There are not many of us called upon to face that particular problem (although there are more than some people seem to suppose), but our sorrows, whatever they may be, equally involve only an unrelieved tragedy, until we face them. All that there is until we do that, is agony, accomplishing nothing. Once they are faced, the agony becomes creative.

The second thing that needs to be remembered is this, that once a suffering has been faced and offered to the Eternal, to be used for mankind, there must be no further complaining. After Gethsemane, the Lord took what was coming to Him without a word. We are for the most part not that brave. We are continually demanding pity; pity from friends and relatives, pity from ourselves, pity even from God. I know a man who prepared himself for more than thirty years that he might do one great thing, only to find at the end of that time that he was never going to have the opportunity to do that thing. What bitter suffering! He faced it. He offered to God that disappointed ambition. But

over and over again, even to this day, he demands the pity of us who know him; and every time he does demand that pity, the agony becomes again only agony, with all the purpose gone from it.

But you say, "I cannot face my problem, and, having faced it, keep for ever silent. I cannot." You must. "I cannot." You must. Jesus, who knows what is in man, insists upon that! Can you drink of the cup of which He drinks, or be baptized with the baptism wherewith He is baptized? There is nothing superficial about the Christian life.

That is what the Holy Cross is all about. Christianity does furnish a solution of the problem of suffering, not a logical solution, but a superlogical one. And the hold of Christianity upon human beings even until today, and beyond into tomorrow, is attributable chiefly to that fact.

Of all this the Lord Jesus Himself was quite sure; and being sure, His suffering became the source of redemption for the human race. What faith was His! What a dynamic solution to the problem of pain!

But, perhaps we say, it was easier for Jesus

so completely to be sure, than it can be for us. He is God, and we are only men. That is a thing easy to say, but not wholly true. He is God, yes; but He is also man; and He shared completely our human nature, with its many limitations. Because of the reality of that manhood, He knew the temptation to collapse under suffering. In the Garden of Gethsemane, and even on the Cross, He knew. Nor is it wholly true that we are merely men. In response to His love, we give to Him, or at least may give to Him, what little trust we do possess; and when we do, in response He pours out on us His grace, the free gift of His own great power, imparting to us the strength and confidence that comes from Deity.

Faith enough to use our suffering creatively is not merely a thing of our own weak devising. It is a gift from God, to be prayed for, begged for. It is the one great gift that we may rightly beseech for ourselves. Riches, we who are Christians dare not ask, for He to whom we pray has none Himself, nor popularity, nor ease, nor length of life, nor freedom from pain and sorrow. What we may ask is only what He does indeed possess: enduring faith, a vision of Re-

ality as complete as His in nature, even though here on earth it can not be vision otherwise complete. "If thou canst believe," He says, "all things are possible to him that believes." (St. Mark 9:24) "And the apostles said unto Him, Lord, increase our faith." (St. Luke 17:5) And so, my brethren, must we also say, if we are to be fruitful even unto death.

All this is embodied in the holy liturgy, the earlier portions of which set the tone of the sacrificial pleading and the feast of the soul! There we have the two-fold cry of suffering man to God: *Kyrie eleison* and *Credo*. "*Kyrie eleison*. I am ignorant, I am weak. I am overwhelmed with fear of life. Have compassion on me, Lord of pity and of power. *Kyrie eleison*." And "*Credo*. I believe. I put my trust in Thee, O God: not in myself, not in my weak, betraying brethren. To Thee alone, O Holiest, I entrust myself. I do believe. Help Thou my unbelief. Driven to Thee by what I have perceived in all things less than Thee, I cry aloud: *Credo, Credo, Credo*."

And then there comes from Jesus, as the liturgy goes on, His answers to those cries, answers that fortify, answers that satisfy, answers so

penetrating that they cannot be clothed in sound. The first reply is *caritas*, God's eternal love, love not in words but in deed and in truth, love from a Cross of pain and suffering. That is the first of God's faith-imparting replies to the appeal of our weakness and discouragement. The second is as silent and sufficient as the first. It is the impartation of His peace. These are God's answers to the age-long query: "Why suffering?"

SUGGESTED READING

The argument above is condensed from a chapter in the author's book, *Beyond Agnosticism*, published in America by Harper and Brothers, and in England by George Allen and Unwin, Ltd. To that book the reader is referred for further development of the subject. Also to: Canon Streeter's *Reality*; Illingworth's essay on "The Problem of Pain" in *Lux Mundi*; Masterman's essay on "The Problem of Suffering" in *Topics of the Times*; *The Element of Pain and Suffering in Human Life*, by W. R. Sorley and others; *The Mystery of Suffering*, by J. H. Brooks; Denney's *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*; *The Christian Answer to the Problem of Evil*, by J. S. Whale; the fourth essay in von Hügel's *Essays and Addresses, first series*; *The Element of Pain and Conflict in Human Life*, by F. R. Tennant; and *The Philosophy of the Good Life*, by Charles Gore. Almost all the standard works on the Philosophy of Religion have sections dealing with pain and suffering.